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ABSTRACT

Based on transcribed conversations with black children in kindergarten and the intermediate grades, a study was devised to determine whether black urban children from lower socioeconomic areas speak a systematic, consistent form of nonstandard English, and if so, to provide a syntactical analysis of the dialect of nonstandard speakers. Speech samples from five groups of black children (kindergarten children, low achieving readers, better achieving readers, lower socioeconomic children, and higher socioeconomic children) were coded and tabulated according to the frequency and relative percentage of use of seven standard and eight nonstandard speech characteristics. No support was found for the notion that black nonstandard English was used consistently or that it provided a separate dialect. There was considerable overlapping in the use of both standard and nonstandard speech in the groups, and standard usage was dominant. (A transcribed and coded speech sample and the guide for interpreting speech characteristics are appended.) (MAI)

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Black Dialect: Myth and Reality

Walter Gantt

Is there a dialect which is systematic and a constant in the language of Black nonstandard English(NSE) speakers? The answer, apparently, is in the affirmative. Linguistic scholars, as well as educators, testify that there are readily identifiable characteristics. These characteristics, both phonological and syntactical, have been set forth in studies by Shuy (1966-1968), Wolfram (1969), Labov (1972a; 1972b; 1972c) and Baratz (1972). They are invariably linked with socio-cultural factors and school achievement in the urban ghetto. However, there are some questions which remain unresolved. How consistent is this dialect, expecially in school? Is its use sufficiently prevalent to support the assertion in the educational literature that it is a major factor in the low achievement of urban black children in reading? Which is myth? Which is reality?

Purpose of the Study

Commenting upon the language differences which the children from the ghettos of Washington, D.C. brought into the classroom Baratz (1972: 12) stated that "understanding that the inner-city child speaks a language that is well-ordered but different in many respects from standard English (SE), is crucial to understanding how to educate him." She also recommended that vernacular and transitional readers in the NSE dialect be created for him (1972:21). Labov (1972a: 5) reported that teachers felt that their difficulties in teaching Black children to read were "due in part to the systematic contradictions between the rules of language used by the child and the rules used by the teacher." He also viewed the NSE dialect as one set

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apart from white dialects with equivalent ways of making known the same meanings.

Dissatisfaction with these and similar points of view prompted this investigator to make a syntactical analysis of speech samples from urban Black children to determine how different was the dialect of Black NSE speakers from that of SE.

Methodology and Population

The present study represents a post hoc analysis of data collected from speech samples from two separate studies involving five groups of Black children, totalling 174, in Baltimore, Maryland and Washington, D.C. Limitations are imposed upon the inferences which can be derived because of the discrete nature of the two populations and of the ways in which the samples in the two cities were drawn. However, if the implications stimulate the development of more rigorously refined inquiries,then this effort will be considered a productive one.

Teachers in four elementary schools, widely separated, in economically depressed areas of Baltimore City had been asked to recommend children who were verbal, that is spoke freely and readily, from the kindergarten and the intermediate grades. The intermediate children were further identified as being "low" achievers and "better" achievers in reading, making a total of three groups. The designations of "low" and "better" achievers proved to be relative ones, however. In most instances the "low" achievers were two or more grades below grade level in reading; the "better" readers were at grade level or one year below in reading according to test scores.

Children in Washington, D. C. had been randomly selected from all third grade children in two widely separated schools and were divided into two

groups. One was a Title I school, designating one in an economically depressed neighborhood where the average income of parents fell below the poverty level and the population was classified as limited in educational, sociocultural and/or language development. The other was a non-Title I school, designating one in a more socio-economically favored neighborhood whose adult population had a higher educational background.

Each of the children in the five groups in individual interviews had been asked to tell a story about a picture (Shaftel and Shaftel, 1967) showing a boy and girl in a depressed urban neighborhood staring at several broken bags of scattered groceries lying on a street. Each story was tape-recorded and typed as it was delivered spontaneously by the speaker with the exception that the interviewer was allowed a maximum of three verbal prompts: 1) "Tell me more;" 2) "What do you think happened next?"; and 3) "If that were you what would you do?" (For details of the Washington study which dealt with the relationship between listening comprehension and syntactical divergency see Gantt,Wilson, Dayton, 1975. The Baltimore study was not published.) The resultant transcripts were coded,(see Appendix A) double checked by two investigators independent of each other and the results were compared in order to establish the reliability of the coding system. In the few instances in which there were disagreements, a strict interpretation of the criteria (see Appendix B) was agreed upon. One example follows:

Standard		Nonstandard
7	I see two boys. They x going to the store.	2

The line under the s in boys indicates a standard use of a plural marker. The x between they and going indicates a nonstandard use of zero copula.

Following the coding the information was analyzed and tabulated by frequencies and percentages of usage of SE characteristics or their NSE counterparts (see Appendix A) such as: 1) absence of the s in the third person singular, present tense; 2) zero copula (linking verb), 3) double negation including ain't; 4) substitution of did or can for the if expression of option or condition; 5) zero past marker; 6) zero possessive marker; 7) zero plural marker; 8) use of be in the habitual or temporal sense.

The tables showing frequencies and percentages of usage of SE and NSE in the speech samples obtained in Baltimore City and Washington, D. C. were the data sources for the present inquiry into characteristics of the dialect of the five groups of urban Black children previously described: kindergarten, low achieving readers, better achieving readers, low socio-economic, and higher socio-economic. Characteristics of the total group were also studied. Finally, educational implications were discussed as they pertained to the questions which were the concern of this study.

Results of the Study

The following tables show percentages of use by children in this study of each of the seven SE and eight NSE characteristics observed in their speech samples. It should be noted that it was not possible to contrast NSE characteristic eight, use of "be" in the habitual or temporal sense with one of the seven SE characteristics because, having no SE counterpart, its use is confined to the NSE dialect. However, observation of frequency of use as compared with other NSE characteristics provided a grasp of its relative importance.

Table I - Percentages of standard and non-standard characteristics in speech of a sample of third grade urban Black children (Title I): N-47

Speech Characteristics	Third Person "s"		Copula		Negation		Conditional "if"		Past Marker		Possession		Plural Marker		Temporal "Be"	
	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		8	
	f[1]	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Standard	6	37	110	59	3	12	11	92	104	70	10	59	26	67		
Nonstandard	10	63	77	41	21	88	1	8	45	30	7	41	13	33	6	100

Table I shows the percentages of each of the seven SE and eight NSE characteristics observed in the speech of a group of forty-seven randomly selected third grade urban Black children from a lower socio-economic (Title I) population in Washington, D. C. When these pupils had an opportunity to use a SE or NSE speech form they used a greater percentage of the following five SE characteristics: copula (linking verb) 59%, conditional 92%, past marker 70%, possession 59%, and plural marker 67%. A greater percentage of NSE forms was used in only two instances: Negative (absence of) third person "s" 63% and double negation 88%. It can also be noted that the frequency of six in category eight, the NSE "be," is relatively or substantially smaller than six other categories of NSE usage.

Table II - Percentages of standard and non-standard characteristics in speech of a sample of third grade urban Black children (Non-title I): N=48

Speech Characteristics	Third Person "s"		Copula		Negation		Conditional "if"		Past Marker		Possession		Plural Marker		Temporal "Be"	
	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		8	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Standard	7	26	132	62	8	36	9	90	72	89	10	83	43	90		
Nonstandard	20	74	81	38	14	64	1	10	9	11	2	17	5	10	2	100

1. Frequencies (f) of standard and nonstandard usage in each category reveal opportunities that the particular sample of children had to use the characteristic.

Table II shows the percentage of each of the seven SE and eight NSE characteristics observed in the speech of a group of forty-eight randomly selected third grade urban Black children from a low-middle-class (Non-title I) population in Washington, D. C. They used a greater percentage of the following five SE forms: copula 63%, conditional 90%, past marker 89%, possession 83%, and plural marker 90%. A greater percentage of NSE forms was used in only two categories: negative third person "s" 74% and double negation 64%. When compared with the frequency of use of five other characteristics of NSE usage the frequency of two in category eight, the NSE "be", was substantially smaller.

Table III - Percentages of standard and non-standard characteristics in speech of a sample of intermediate grade Black children from a depressed urban area. (low achievers in reading): N=44

Speech Characteristics	Third Person "s"		Copula		Negation		Conditional "if"		Past Marker		Possession		Plural Marker		Temporal "Be"	
	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		8	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Standard	27	37	208	69	10	31	39	78	139	78	9	36	36	63		
Nonstandard	46	63	94	31	22	69	11	22	39	22	16	64	21	37	4	100

Table III shows the percentages of each of the SE and NSE characteristics observed in the speech of a group of forty-four selected intermediate grade Black children located in a depressed urban area in Baltimore City and designated as lower achievers in reading. They used greater percentages of the following four SE forms: copula 69%, conditional 78%, past marker 78%, and plural marker 63%. Greater percentages of NSE were used in three categories:

third person "s" 63%, double negation 69%, and possession 64%. When compared with each of the other characteristics of NSE, the frequency of four in category eight, the nonstandard "be," was substantially smaller.

Table IV - Percentages of standard and non-standard characteristics in speech intermediate grades Black children from a depressed urban area. ("better" achievers in reading): N=20

Speech Characteristics	Third Person "s"		Copula		Negation		Conditional "if"		Past Marker		Possession		Plural Marker		Temporal "Be"	
	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		8	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Standard	0	0	95	88	5	36	8	100	73	92	2	50	22	76		
Nonstandard	3	100	13	12	9	64	0	0	6	8	2	50	7	24	0	0

Table IV shows the percentages of each of the seven SE and eight NSE characteristics observed in the speech of a group of twenty selected intermediate-grade Black children located in a depressed urban area in Baltimore City and designated as "better" achievers in reading. They used greater percentages of the following four SE forms: copula 88%, conditional 100%, past marker 92%, and plural marker 76%. They used equal percentages of SE and NSE possessive forms. A greater percentage of NSE was used in two categories: third person "s" 100% and double negation 64%. There was no observed nonstandard "be".

Table V - Percentages of standard and non-standard characteristics in speech of Black kindergartners from a depressed urban area; N=15

Speech Characteristics	Third Person "s"		Copula		Negation		Conditional "it"		Past Marker		Possession		Plural Marker		Temporal "Be"	
	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		8	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Standard	5	42	40	49	1	25	1	50	25	62	1	100	9	90		
Nonstandard	7	58	41	51	3	75	1	50	15	38	0	0	1	10	3	100

Table V shows the percentages of each of the seven SE and eight NSE characteristics observed in the speech of a group of 15 "verbal" kindergarten children in a depressed urban area in Baltimore City. They used a greater percentage of the following three SE forms: past marker 62%, possession 100% and plural marker 90%. They used approximately equivalent percentages of SE and NSE copula and conditional forms. A greater percentage of NSE characteristics was used in only two categories: negative third person "s" 58% and double negation 75%. When compared with the four other characteristics of NSE usage the frequency of three, in category eight, the NSE "be", was no greater or substantially smaller.

Table VI - Percentages of standard and non-standard characteristics in speech of total sample of urban Black children in grades K-6: N=174

Speech Characteristics	Third Person "s"		Copula		Negation		Conditional "if"		Past Marker		Possession		Plural Marker		Temporal "Be"	
	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		8	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Standard	45	34	585	66	27	28	68	83	413	78	32	54	136	74		
Nonstandard	86	66	306	34	69	72	14	17	114	22	27	46	47	26	15	100

Table VI shows the percentages of each of the seven SE and eight NSE characteristics observed in the speech of the total group of 174 selected urban Black children in grades Kindergarten to Six in Washington D. C. and Baltimore City. They used a greater proportion of the following five SE forms: copula 66%, conditional 83%, past marker 78%, possession 54% and plural marker 74%. A greater percentage of NSE was used in only two categories: negative (absence of) third person "s" and double negation 72%. The frequency of fifteen in category eight, the NSE "be," was substantially smaller than

that noted in all other NSE categories but one - characteristic four the conditional.

Discussion

It is evident that the children in this study did not have a consistent or systematic dialect which sharply separated them from SE speakers. True, all of the syntactical characteristics of NSE, as defined herein, were present in the samples but, with the exception of two of these characteristics, absence of third person singular "s" and double negation, all groups in the study used a majority of SE forms.

There were also opportunities to get answers to some questions about this sample to which relate to those which have been raised previously about the speech of other Black children in urban schools:

1. What differences were there in the use of SE and NSE speech characteristics within the total sample?

   Across all groups sixty percent of the use was SE and forty percent NSE - a clear majority of standard English in the total sample.

2. Was there a difference in language usage by social class?

   Yes, but in magnitude rather than categorically. Although the four out of seven categories showing majorities of SE usage were the same for both the lower socio-economic group (Title I) and the higher one (Non Title I), the use of SE by the higher socio-economic group was proportionately greater in all of them. In the two categories in which there were minority percentages of SE for both groups, use of standard negation was proportionately greater for the higher socio-economic group but use of the third person

singular "s" form was proportionately lower for the same group. The reason for this variation was not clear. Use of the conditional "if" was approximately the same for both groups. There was also proportionately less use of the temporal or habitual "be" by the higher group.

3. Was there a difference in language usage associated with success in reading?

Yes, but as was found with the Title I and Non Title I groups, the differences were in magnitude only - but markedly so. Although the four out of seven categories showing majority percentages of SE usage were the same for both the lower achieving reading group and the higher one, the use of SE by the higher achieving group was proportionately greater in all of them. In two categories in which there were minority percentages of SE for both groups the situation duplicated that of the higher and lower class groups- proportionately greater use of SE negation by the higher achievers but proportionately less use of SE third person "s." The latter variation may be explained by the observation that very little use was made of this syntactical form in the speech samples of the higher achievers in this study. Similarly, use of the standard possessive form by the higher achieving group was proportionately greater than for the lower one. In this instance, too, the relatively small size of the sample may have been a factor. There were no observed instances of the use of the nonstandard "be" by the higher achievers.

4. Did the type of language usage change during the course of school experience?

The pattern of change was not consistent but it was evident that the use of SE speech characteristics by the older group was greater than that of the kindergartners in four of the seven categories. Doubtless, the smallness of the sample limited the bases for comparison of the kindergartners with the total group. However, even within the confines of the population in this study, it is of interest to note that a similar trend was seen: in categories where the SE usage was high in the total group, the same was true with the group of kindergartners. The 100% SE usage tabulated for characteristic six, possession, was the result of having only one utterance recorded in that category. There were three observed instances of the NSE "be" which was average for the total group. Sufficient questions are raised by these observations to warrant a further study.

Summary

The preceding analysis shows that even when the usage of sub-groups within the total group was contrasted there were recurring patterns-predominant use of a majority of SE speech characteristics and comparatively limited use of a peculiarly NSE characteristic such as the temporal or habitual "be." The commonly observed majority uses of NSE within the groups were with two categories-characteristics one, third person "s," and characteristic three negation. There was also noted a greater proportion of SE by the better readers and the higher socio-economic level children in this study. With the exception of the majority use of the NSE form of the possessive by the lower-achievers-labelled sub-group, all groups used a majority of standard forms in a majority of the categories.

The myth of Black NSE is not its existence but the notion that it is used consistently and that it exists widely as a separate spoken dialect. The reality is that in this era of mass communication and population mobility in our country, pockets of extreme cultural isolation in which a distinct dialect could survive intact are relatively rare and limited to situations similar to that of the "Gullah" or "Geechee" Blacks in the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina or the more secluded areas of the Appalachian Highlands. Regardless of the impact that NSE characteristics have upon the ear of one accustomed to middle class speech, all of the groups in this study used a majority of standard English syntax. Discriminative listening would probably verify this finding in other locations. Although all syntactical speech characteristics selected for this study were found within all of the subgroups observed, their use by individuals was secondary to standard English in most instances. Furthermore, in no instance were all characteristics of the NSE dialect found in the speech of any one individual. Many did not use the separate characteristics consistently, even. For instance, it was not unusual for a child to use the SE form of the third person singular "s" in one instance, the NSE form in a following utterance or even to change a nonstandard to a standard form.

Attributions of "persistent," "systematic," and "separateness" have been the outcomes of many studies of Black NSE and have influenced strongly recommendations for curriculum adaptations such as the use of language pattern drills in teaching English as a second language. These attributions were not borne out by this study. In fact these children had the necessary resources to participate actively in a flexible and varied developmental language program.

Geneva Smitherman, Associate Professor in Speech Communication at Wayne State University, presented a perspective which supports the findings of this investigation.

> It is true that a number of early Black American English forms have survived until the present day, but it is also true that the distance between contemporary Black and White American English is not as great as it once was... With such close linguistic-cultural contact the influence of the majority culture and language on its minorities is powerful indeed, and there is great pressure on the majorities to assimilate and adopt the culture and language of the majority. (1977: 291)

A second myth, not dealt with in this study and one which receives additional support as additional test results are released, is that the low reading achievement associated with Black NSE speaking children results from the difficulties they meet in relating their language to the unfamiliar syntax of their readers. It might be more appropriate to surmise, however, if one major factor in their low achievement is the lowered expectations which are triggered within some members of the academic community when they hear a child using NSE speech in the classroom.

Dialect and usage variations do have some implications for teachers of reading. However, the way and extent to which these variations influence children learning to read standard English had not been established by research (Burns and Roe 1976:68). Doubtless some interference exists but research has shown that Black children can comprehend standard English as well as White children can. (Peisach, 1965; Weener, 1969). Liu (1975) found no difference in the comprehension of dialect speaking Black children

of SE and NSE reading materials. Fortunately, teachers are becoming increasingly alert to findings such as those reported in this study. As they giv_ greater recognition and expressive release to the total language resources of children and, as they differentiate between the myths and realities which affect learning, then, attention can be directed to other elements which significantly affect children"s achievement and influence their success in reading.

Appendix A

Example of a Transcribed and Coded Speech Sample[1]

Standard		Nonstandard
	Boy - Grade 3 (Title I School)	
5	He dropped the bag and his mother x gone get him	2
5,5	He dropped all the food and the milk spilled. And,	
	and the stuff waste x all in the street. And they	5
7	start x looking at it. And, and these oranges they waste x	5,5
	out. And the bag tore. And food start x going spilling	5
	out the bag. And then you know, need x another paper	5
	bag. And the milk ain't no x good. The milk x already	3,2
	come all out the boag. And he need x another bag	5
	put the oranges, and the can goods in the bag	
5	And the bag tore. And they dropped the bag. And	
5	then the bag slipped out their hand x. and drop x and	7,5
	the bag tore. And then he start x looking at the	5
	bag. And the milk waste x all out. (Next) they x gonna go	5,2
	home and their mother might beat them. (If this were me, I'd) go home.	
	No - I'd find another bag and stuff x going to be all	
	on the ground, pick it up. And put it in	
	another bag.	

Instances of Standard and Nonstandard Characteristics in Speech Sample[1]

Speech Characteristics	1	2	3	4	5[2]	6	7	8	Total
Standard					5		1		6
Nonstandard		3	1		9		1		14

1. See Appendix B, "Guide for Interpreting Speech Characteristics." For example, 5 standard refers to the standard English past marker ed affixed to dropped and 2 nonstandard refers to the NSE characteristics of zero copula before the past participle gone.
2. Note that both standard and nonstandard usage of a speech characteristic may occur within the same speech sample.

Appendix B

Guide for Interpreting Speech Characteristics

The following characteristics are syntactic features of Black non-standard (NSE), or divergent speech as identified by Baratz. For the purposes of the present study these were interpreted as shown.

1)[1] Absence of the "s" in the third person singular, present tense.

Example: His father work in the store.

(His father works in the store.)[2]

2) Zero copula

There is no link between a subject and its referent.

Example: He a bad boy.

(He is a bad boy.)

There is no link between a subject and participle or a subject and its modifier in the predicate.

Examples: She going to the movies.

(She is going to the movies.)

John sad because he dropped the bottle.

(John is sad because he dropped the bottle.)

3) Double negation and "ain't"

Evidence must be present of actual use.

Examples: He didn't see no cars.

(He didn't see any cars.)

She ain't seen nobody.

(She hasn't seen anyone.)

4) Substitution of "did" or "can" for the "if" expression of choice or a possible action

Examples: See can your mother do anything about it.

(See if your mother can do anything about it.)

5) Zero past marker

Consideration was limited to the absence of ed, t or d affixed to regular forms of verbs where major stem or other morphological changes do not occur in the past tense. Forms such as kept, spilt, meant, said, sent, lost, and felt were coded as standard. Not coded were words in which major stem or morphological changes occur in the past tense such as: thought, saw, caught, went, and told. Some endings are naturally elided in standard linguistic discourse. For example, in the sentence, "He dropped the ball." the d ending is generally elided before a word beginning with a consonant. However, in the sentence, "He dropped it." the d ending is generally linked with the vowel at the beginning of the following word. Consequently, in analyzing the speech samples, the identification of the presence or absence of the past marker was considered feasible only if it a) occurred before a natural pause or juncture in the linquistic unit (as in "Mother shall get mad at us and we shall be punish(ed)."); b) preceded a word beginning with a vowel or an unvoiced h (as in "He clean(ed) up the mess" or "She push(ed) him."); or c) was an inflection in the form of a stressed syllable as in "He waste(ed) the milk.").

6) Zero possessive marker

Example: They lost their mother money.

(They lost their mother's money.)

7) Zero plural marker

Only these allomorphs of s were counted: e, es. Not counted was

en as in children or ee as in teeth.

A distinction was made between collective and individual possession of some referents expressed in singular form:

Examples: Non-standard forms-their hand, their mind. (Standard forms - their mother, their house, their food, their bicycle).

I see three car in the picture.

(I see three cars in the picture.)

8) Use of "be" in a habitual or temporal sense. Requires support of "do", explicit or implied. Has no standard counterpart.

Example: He be working. (He has a regular job to which he reports or which he performs regularly.)

He been working. (He has been on the job a long time.)

Then I be minding my own business going down the street and some boys boys trying to come mess with me.

(This refers to an activity or condition within a given time and space segment.) So you know it all don't be be on her. (She doesn't have to do [illegible] thing all the time.)

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1. These numbers were the sources of the numerical code for marking the type-scripts.

2. Standard form is in parentheses.

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